Preparing Our Schools for the BYOD World
By Stephen Abram

In ancient times schools provided virtually all of the technology for teaching. Typewriters in neat rows, blackboards morphed into whiteboards and now morph into smartboards. And computer labs were separate ‘classrooms’ or added into library environments. The most portable things about ‘education’ were textbooks, writing implements, and notebooks.

No more.

I define ‘education’ as something institutions do to groups of people. ‘Learning’ is different. It’s something that we do and experience singly and in groups and can do for ourselves without as much formal structure. Responsibility shifts a little more to the learner while teaching shifts more to facilitation and coaching. The widening grey space between education and learning is challenging our institutional learning frameworks big time. Integrally tied to this major transition from ‘education’ to ‘learning’ is the emergence of the plethora of newer technologies (Consider Siri, Watson, Google Glass, Pebble, etc.). The one I want to focus on in this issue’s column is the impact of mobile devices on institutional settings – schools, boards, classrooms, and libraries.

Nothing has challenged this more than the BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) trend. There have been a few very high profile and very expensive experiments to try whole school implementation of mobile devices (generally tablets). These have been reported as spectacular failures in the popular and professional press (as opposed to pilots and learning opportunities). It’s a shame. From my perspective, these pilots were PR disasters for a number of reasons:

1. The schools tried to standardize on a single device framework such as Apple iPads or Android tablets – often with funding (and attendant control) from the supplier.
2. The schools tried to maintain their filtering and reduced access policies on the standard devices.
3. The schools tried to restrict student performance (instead of enabling them to soar) by disallowing downloads, software additions, some plug-ins, etc.

These are interesting principles to underpin a mobile device experiment. The basic principle and goal seems to be to reduce the usefulness of a device and control – to a fault – the student’s exploration and learning experiences into a narrow band of information and behaviors.
Secondly, they seem to support a principle that the system environment’s needs for standardization to reduce complexity and cost trump student experience and learning, while prioritizing administration and management needs over learning.

Thirdly, they have sold out to standardizing on a single device and a single supplier – usually to fund the pilot but often with a look to longer term partnerships. Many device manufacturers are restricting access based on format (Kindles) or censoring content (Apple) or developing relationships and acquiring traditional publishers and promoting their own content and learning systems. Would any library standardize on a single publisher? Would any board, as a matter of standardization and policy, standardize on a single textbook supplier? Seems patently ridiculous but this seems to be a trend of some experiments so far. On the other hand, supplier’s needs to create competitive advantage through the creation of walled gardens enforced through proprietary standards are antithetical to the needs of public institutions like schools and libraries.

And lastly, these pilots seem to be in denial about the real world. Observably, the real world has a plethora of operating systems that provide choice and competition driving innovation. This real world isn’t theoretical – it is the one students experience and know everywhere else. Are we preparing students for a world where they’re adapting to a single device supplier and experience? Have we learning nothing from the PC-Mac wars (or the old days when browsers didn’t operate to WWW standards)?

It seems pretty obvious that excess control of the technology environment in schools is a horse that left the barn quite a while ago. Our institutional settings can remain in denial and continue to fail, and fail serially, or they can enter a 12-step program and admit the obvious:

1. The student population is already mobile. They are using a plethora of operating systems from iPhones through Android to Windows phones.
2. WiFi settings are the norm out in the norm out in the real world and schools don’t get an exemption from that expectation. If the user isn’t able to access WiFi then they often switch to their data plan which is now rarely compromised by location.
3. Tablets are emerging as the device of choice in a multiple device ecosystem. They’re light, access the digital world and work using the normal web and apps which are turning into an economic, learning, social and cultural ecosystem that is currently boundless.
4. Students in the pilots demonstrated the ability to break any DRM, digital lock, system lockdown, or any other limit put on the devices by the board. Those that didn’t know learned quickly with peer support. This is a bad thing?
5. Not acknowledging these environmental factors just brings down disrespect from the learning population and they seek support using maverick and alternative means.

So, as you learn from your BYOD pilots and observing mobile device usage in your learning environment here’s some advice:

1. Stand up for reality. Don’t let assumptions like school-wide filters go unchallenged as if the students can’t circumvent them easily just by hopping on their data plan.
2. Focus on training and education, not the device. Allow for all types of devices. It’s neither wise to standardize (especially for longer-term issues of competition and preparing for the real world environment) nor is it even realistic in this toddler stage of mobile device development.
3. Allow everyone to download apps. Restrictions just stifle not empower.
4. Keep in mind what the outside world is like and avoid being in island where the digital experience is disabled, limited, parochial, and arcane. It just makes it too hard to learn and self-actualize.

I’ve watched my wife perform in her grade four classroom. She got a smartboard installed this year (versus the old portable one) and downloads lessons from home for the laptop that’s attached. Still she remains WiFi free in her classroom. That said she bought herself a tiny projector that attaches to her iPhone and can project pictures, websites and video for the whole class to enjoy and learn. The class knows she has access to websites and Wikipedia and more on her phone and insist on exploring their lessons collaboratively. She works the edges of a locked-down school. Even in primary school the kids have phones, access, gaming devices and more. The challenge isn’t locking them down but disciplining knowledge about appropriate use and timing. Deciding to ignore this by pretending that it’s locked down, doesn’t endow these kids with the skills they need to learn.

So I commend to you this list that I picked up and re-posted to my blog, Stephen’s Lighthouse:

**The Ten Commandments of BYOD**

“The rapid proliferation of mobile devices entering the workplace feels like divine intervention to many IT leaders. It’s as if a voice boomed down from the mountain ordering all of the employees you support to procure as many devices as possible and connect them to corporate services en masse. But how you support workforce desire to use personal apps and devices while allowing them to be productive in a secure environment that protects corporate data? Find out with these Ten Commandments:
Thou Shalt Allow BYOD: The Ten Commandments of BYOD

1. Create Thy Policy Before Procuring Technology
2. Seek The Flocks’ Devices
3. Enrollment Shall Be Simple
4. Thou Shalt Configure Devices Over the Air
5. Thy Users Demand Self-Service

6. Hold Sacred Personal Information
7. Part the Seas of Corporate and Personal Data
8. Manage Thy Data Usage
9. Monitor Thy Flock—Herd Automatically
10. Drink from the Fountain of ROI

I’ve also blogged a few useful infographics and references on my blog and here are some of those links to explore:

**Going BYOD**

**BYOD By The Numbers [Infographic]**
http://readwrite.com/2013/03/26/intel-byod-by-the-numbers?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+ReadWriteWeb%29&utm_content=Google+Reader

**BYOD: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly**

**Worried Workers: BYOD Or You’re SOL [Infographic]**
Is paranoia blurring the line between work and home?

http://readwrite.com/2012/12/06/pause-economy-linked-to-bring-your-own-device-use?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+ReadWriteWeb%29

**BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) in the Classroom**
BYOD means Bring Your Own Device. Learners bringing their devices (and sometimes sharing) can sometimes work in some neighbourhoods.
10 BYOD Classroom Experiments (and What We’ve Learned From Them So Far)

http://stephenslighthouse.com/2012/08/16/byod-bring-your-own-device-in-the-classroom/

Let’s just remember that this mobile device environment is still in its early stages and will mutate beyond our imagination before most of our learners are grown. It’s far more important to create learning opportunities for critical judgment, learning and ethics than to teach time-limited skills or to show overly restrictive environments that limit their potential. Yes, it’s a political and institutional challenge but it’s a critical one to the future success of our world.

Stephen Abram, MLS is managing principal of Lighthouse Consulting Inc. and an affiliate of Dysart & Jones Associates. He has held executive roles in information and software vendors as well as management roles in libraries. He is a Past President of SLA, the Ontario Library Association and the Canadian Library Association. He is an international speaker, author of ALA Edition’s Out Front with Stephen Abram and Stephen’s Lighthouse Blog. Stephen would love to hear from you at stephen.abram@gmail.com.